

In The Loop: Hundreds attend ADOT open house Improvements to 303 planned

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Hundreds of residents filled the Willow Canyon High School cafeteria Oct. 22 to offer their input on Loop 303 improvements planned by the Arizona Department of Transportation.

ADOT hosted the open house to solicit public comment on potential upgrades to the loop from Interstate 10 to U.S. 60.

"We are looking for the public's input and judging by the turnout, the public will have a lot to say," said ADOT spokesman Tim Tait. "We planned on a large crowd here tonight and we are pleased to see so many people interested in this project."

Before a formal presentation began, those in attendance gathered around various maps on display in the cafeteria. Some spoke to ADOT officials while others filled out comment cards and handed them to transportation officials.

Steve Beasley of ADOT told the crowd expansion of Loop 303 is necessary as the area becomes a key part of a regional corridor.

"If we don't build this, there will be problems in the future," Mr. Beasley said. "Growth has necessitated expansion of the loop."

The proposed Loop 303 expansion is included in the Maricopa Association of Governments' regional transportation plan, according to ADOT documentation. Local funding for these improvements was approved in 2004 by county voters through Proposition 400, that renewed a half-cent sales tax through 2025 for regional transportation projects.

Improvements are needed to accommodate existing and projected local, regional and interstate travel demand.

The list of recommended Loop 303 improvements on the 16-mile stretch between Interstate 10 and U.S. 60 include:

- Widening the road to 10 lanes (one high- occupancy and four general purpose lanes in each direction).
 - Building major interchanges to connect the loop with I-10 and the proposed Northern Parkway.
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David French, center, a member of the ADOT Loop 303 planning team, talks to North-west Valley residents last week about proposed upgrades to the loop. Hundreds of residents turned out for the forum at Willow Canyon High School.

- Constructing 14 traffic interchanges along the loop at major cross streets.

The list of improvements includes the construction of a bridge over Loop 303 at Bell Road.

Just south of Surprise city limits, ADOT plans driver safety improvements at the Cactus and Waddell road crossings.

The Bell, Cactus and Waddell upgrades will cost about \$22 million allocated from the Statewide Acceleration Needs account. No cost estimate was given for the entire Loop 303 improvement project.

Fred Garcia of ADOT spoke briefly on noise issues and said the road improvements include rubberized pavement to reduce noise originating from the loop.

ADOT officials then held a required public hearing, allowing guests one minute each to speak on the project.

Former city councilmen Cliff Elkins, a transportation expert, stressed the importance of the project.

"Actually, this project is about 10 years late," Mr. Elkins said. "Even the East Valley has seen the importance of this. Loop 303 will be very, very critical in the future."

Chuck Ullman of PORA in Sun City West asked that monitors be placed near the road to address health concerns of those living near the loop.

"And some sound mitigation needs to be part of this," he added.

Many people were cut off by the short time ADOT allowed for each speaker.

Surprise residents Ted Carr and Jim Olmsted were unhappy with the hearing format.

"One minute to speak is a joke," Mr. Olmsted said. "It's not even enough time to get your point across."

Mr. Carr said the Loop 303 improvements are needed.

"It is necessary," he explained. "Especially as we move into the future and there are more people out in this area."

The next step in the process is ADOT compiling and addressing comments received and including them in the final environmental assessment. ADOT and the Federal Highway Administration will review comments on the design and mitigation measures to determine if any modifications are needed.

The final environmental assessment will then be sent to the FHWA for final review and approval.

After the FHWA reviews the documents, they can issue a Finding of No Significant Impacts, which will allow the project to move forward to the final design phase. The FHWA can also determine that more environmental study is necessary.

Mr. Tait said assuming no snags, ADOT could begin construction of the improvements in 2011 and be complete by 2018. He noted the Bell Road/Loop 303 bridge portion of the project would be built closer to the 2011 or 2012 time frame.